First Mail Delivery in Fairbury Area

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The story about the first mail route that served the Fairbury area is fascinating. The first mail carrier in this area was George Washington Rice (1834-1926). At least two data sources describe how these first mail routes were operated.

The first historical reference source for the first mail routes was a 1915 four-page paper titled ***Old Time Postal Distribution in Illinois*** by Dr. John Ryan (1860-1948). Dr. Ryan was a Methodist minister in Central Illinois for over 60 years. He was a minister in Pontiac and was the Chaplain of the Boys Reformatory for 20 years. Reverend Ryan was very interested in local history and served as the President of the Livingston County Historical Society. A copy of Dr. Ryan's paper can be viewed or downloaded from https://tinyurl.com/5cv4u9c7.

A copy of Dr. Ryan's paper about early postal distribution was found by accident in early 2024 when the Livingston County Historical Society's archives were being inventoried. Dr. Ryan interviewed Mr. G. W. Rice, the first mail carrier who lived in Pontiac in 1915, for his paper.

Further investigation found that G. W. Rice's full name was George Washington Rice (1834-1926). The Daily Leader obituary for Mr. Rice noted that he was Pontiac's first mail carrier and gave some details of his mail route. Mr. Rice was also a Civil War veteran and a long-time Pontiac merchant, including operating a furniture factory.

In the 1830s, Mr. W. K. Brown settled on Mud Creek in Esmen Township. While living in Livingston County, Mr. Brown took charge of several mail routes. He later moved to Ottawa in 1848.

In 1839, George Rice was 15 years old. He attended school but was able to work part-time on a mail route for Mr. Brown. George eventually worked as a mail carrier on each of the five mail routes Mr. Brown was in charge of. The mail carriers usually rode on horseback to complete their deliveries.

The Ottawa to Bloomington mail route served Livingston County. Every Friday morning, George left Ottawa on his mail route. He took a ferry to cross the Illinois River, and his first stop was the Post Office at Covel Creek, run by Mr. Richardson. The next stop was the home of Mr. Elmer Baldwin. George then proceeded to Norton Mackey's home on Otter Creek. George's next stop before taking dinner was the home of Isaac Painter in East Streator.

After dinner, George rode his horse the nine miles from Streator to New Michigan. Mr. Richards kept that postal office. New Michigan is now a ghost town southeast of Streator. It had a post office from 1849 until 1872.

George next went to a home in Sunbury Township. W. K. Brown, John Bradley, and E. G. Rice kept this office at different times. Mr. E. G. Rice was George Rice's father so that George could spend the night at his parents' house on Friday night.

George's mail route resumed Saturday morning when he brought the mail to Pontiac and went to the office in the Willett Gray and Samuel Ladd store.

George then traveled four miles southeast of Pontiac to Daniel Rockwoods's home, where dinner was secured. The next stop was the small village of Avoca in the McDowell settlement. Initially, Mr. Wilson kept the office on the South Fork of the Vermilion River. Because flooding prevented the mail carrier from crossing the river, the location was changed to the McDowell's home. The village of Avoca had a post office from 1838 until 1872.

The last segment of Saturday's route was from Avoca to Indian Grove Township. Fairbury was not founded until 1857, so George delivered mail before the village existed. George spent the night at the Indian Grove postal stop, which had a post office from 1846 until 1859.

On Sunday morning, George rode his horse the 15 miles from Indian Grove to Lexington. In that era, George saw no human inhabitants on this portion of his route. Mr. Flesher kept the Lexington office, and George usually arrived around noon. A church was nearby, and Sunday services were usually over by noon. Churchgoers would linger after church until the mail carrier arrived so they could get their mail.

George then stopped at Money Creek, and his last stop was Bloomington. He started his return trip to Ottawa from Bloomington on Monday morning and arrived back in Ottawa on Tuesday night.

George was paid $8 a month as a postal carrier. In 1850, this salary would equal about $300 in today's dollars.

The mail route was very challenging for the mail carrier in the wintertime. George often had to cross the Illinois River at Ottawa when the ice was thick enough to prevent the ferry from operating but not thick enough for someone to walk on. When this happened, George would alternately put two wood planks in front of him to walk on with his mail sack to cross the thin ice.

The only compensation for traveling in the bad weather was traveling when the weather was nice. Dr. Ryan noted the mail carrier "got to enjoy the gorgeous color of the prairies with the wild free life of bird and beast, full rivers pressing their wooded shores, and variegated fields of green and gold blending with the purple skyline."

Early mail carrier George W. Rice likely saw prairie scenes like this as he rode his horse through Livingston County on his mail route. This photo was taken at the Weston Cemetery on Route 24 between Fairbury and Weston. This old cemetery has many original plants that grew on the Livingston County prairies.